

Female Narration and Cultural Connotation of Rituals in Yi Folk Literature

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Abstract: Folk literature of Yi is an important part of Yi people's life, among which stories with female narrative perspective show the characteristics of local knowledge due to different geographical distribution. Taking typical stories widely spread among the People of Gepo of Yi nationality as examples, this paper discusses the stories with female theme in gap literature, especially the regional characteristics of plot units, character categorization, and the traditional customs of Gepo people conveyed by the stories.

1. Introduction

Yi folk literature is not only an important part of Chinese minority literature, but also an important carrier of traditional Chinese culture. The folk literature of Yi nationality, with its wide distribution and colorful contents, is a life culture created, enjoyed and passed down by the Yi people. In the long social and historical development, the folk literature is mainly transmitted orally in different Yi regions. Under the influence of various internal and external factors such as the dissemination subject and the original culture of the dissemination area, folk literature has formed the same origin and different dissemination, with the same types, similar plot units and similar themes. However, under the direct influence of the natural ecological environment, the content and details of the inheritance of folk literature have changed, which not only caters to the local historical and cultural status quo, but also carries along traditional customs and habits. Gepo people of Yi nationality, living in the alpine region in southeast Yunnan, still keep their peculiar customs which is different from other groups. One of the typical traditional custom is marriage customs and funeral customs. In two important ceremonies, women's unique role and behavior, which is derived from local's people familiar legend, female narrative and rituals, are relatively interdependent and have shown the respect for women in the traditional society of the Gepo people.

2. Introduction

The Gepo people in southeast Yunnan is a branch of Yi nationality with a relatively small population. Based on the long-term field investigation, the author found that the folk legends of this ethnic group are rich in content, among which the legend about the social status of women is unique.

Legend 1: Once upon a time, there was a poor Gopo boy who herded sheep for a living. One day, he took the sheep to a mountain far from home. The sheep got lost in the mountains, and the young man followed the sheep's footprints to the depths of the mountains. Unable to find his sheep, however, the young Man wandered into the depths of a turnip-forest, where he heard voices and decided to ask the speaker if he had seen his sheep. Following the voices, he found seven girls bathing in a spring in the depths of the turnip-forest. He quietly hid in the springs in the woods and took one of the gauze clothes. When seven girls finished bathing and was about to leave, the youngest sister found his gauze clothes had disappeared, while the clothes of other six sisters' was flying up to the sky, since the seven girls was the fairy ladies in the sky originally. So, Gepo boy hold little seven sisters, and sincerely asked the youngest sister to be his wife and start a family. The youngest sister accepted the gepo boy's proposal and stayed in the earth, and later reproduced today's Gepo people.

Legend 2: Once upon a time, there was a poor Gepo boy who made a living by farming. One day, he went to fetch water from a river. When he drew water from a bucket, he caught a beautiful red carp. So, he brought the red fish home in the tank. From then on, he would check the red fish everyday before going out farming. When he came back home, the meal had been prepared on the table. He felt strange but thought that it had been done by the old lady living next door. He thanked the old lady for preparing meals for him, but she denied and said she had done nothing. The young man was even more puzzled. So one day he pretended to go out working as usual, and kept hiding behind the house to find out who had been cooking meals for him. In a short while, the water tank started glittering with golden light and then a beautiful girl came out of the water tank and began to cook. The next day, the young man did the same and hid behind the house. When the goldfish girl finished cooking and was about to go back to the water tank, the Gepo boy ran into the house and embraced her, stopping her from changing back to the goldfish. He begged the girl to stay and be his wife. The girl agreed and told the boy that she was the third daughter of the dragon king, so she was a dragon princess. She thanked the boy for saving her life, and was willing to become a family with him, only on the condition that the boy no longer calling her as smelly fish, and the boy accepted. After the dragon princess and Gepo boy got married, the dragon princess used her precious dragon bag to turn the small family rich. One day, the young man called the dragon Princess a smelly fish because of some trifles, and the dragon princess got furious and left the young man with her magic dragon bag. Since then, the Gepo boy returned to his poor life, and he worshiped a dragon bag at home, in the memory of his wife and the rich life she had brought to him.

The two stories have been widely spread in the Gepo society of Yi nationality, and the plots, themes and characters have obvious categorizing tendencies. The first story falls into the category of the “swan-maiden” type, while the second one is a combination of the “field snail girl” type and the “magic treasure” type. As The American folklorist Thompson noted, “Stories make the anthropologist's view of the whole intellectual and aesthetic activity of human beings clearer and more accurate.” The special attention to women in the literature among the Gepo people of Yi nationality also profoundly influenced the daily behavior and habits of the local people.

3. The Relevance of Yi Traditional Ceremony and Female Narration in Folk Literature

Marriage and funeral are important events in the social life of Gepo People of Yi nationality. Weddings and funerals are the most solemn ceremony for them. During the ceremony, male and female roles are divided clearly. In particular, women are not allowed to bow down.

In the traditional marriage custom of Gepo people of Yi nationality, women have special family and social status in participating in traditional wedding activities. To be specific, they cannot bow down, and the reason why they cannot bow down is the nobility of female status in the stories. Gepo women are fairy ladies in the sky and the third princess of the Dragon Palace. During the wedding, the bride's friends are invited to accompany the bride at home, waiting for the husband's family to marry her. The groom is supposed to kneel down to worship the dragon bag and his parents at home before the wedding ceremony. A little basket with rice and a pinch of salt, and another basket with a bacon and sixty-six yuan are prepared by the groom's parents. When the groom and his friends came to the bride's door, there were friends waiting them to inform the bride's family to ready to meet the groom. After some frolics between the bride and groom's boys, the groom kneels down before his in-laws and begs them to take their daughter away and live a happy life with her. The parents-in-law will cook rice brought by the groom in the basket and repackage the rice before giving to their daughter, and they will urge the daughter to be thrifty, virtuous and filial after getting married. The bride takes the dowry and leaves her home with the groom. Arriving at the bridegroom's house, the bridegroom bowed down to his ancestors and his parents and inform them that he has brought his newly-married wife home. Later in the wedding ceremony, the bride also does not need to bow down.

In Gepo funeral ritual, women were also not allowed to bow. After people passing away, the main task for the wife of the family is to entertain the relatives and friends coming for condolence. Most guests are coming in couples, with males bowing for worshiping while their wives are

“supplying water” and “feeding”. Both ceremonies aim to comforting the dead, and feed the dead with three mouthful of water and rice, keeping him from getting hungry or thirsty in their way back to the ancestral home. In a series of ceremonies, such as encoffination, offering ceremony, hall offering ceremony, raising ceremony, sending ceremony, burial ceremony, and lifting ceremony, women repeat the ritual of “suppling water” and “feeding food” in each link, in order to send the dead to fulfill their filial piety. In particular, in the next morning, after the dead has been buried, sons and daughters-in-law of the dead, as well as daughters and sons-in-law, are supposed to hold the ceremony in the new burial sites. Bimo is standing in the new tomb spreading cereals, and sons and wives of the dead are standing in the downward, pulling up the corners of their skirts and trying to catch as more cereals as possible, blessing the future generations of the dead person will have plenty of food and live a happy and affluent life. The Gepo people believed that this was the blessing of the family, the more the better. Usually, the hostess would receive more blessing, which reflects exactly what the Gepo people said, the blessing of the Gepo was brought by the dragon princess. Likewise, the Gepo women will bring more blessing to their families.

4. The Mutual Construction of Folk Narration and the Ceremony

In Chinese folk stories, there are abundant narratives about women. Most of the male heroes in the stories are poor and without a wife, but they are virtuous, hardworking and kind. In the traditional male-dominated society, they take a wife and have children to carry on the family lineage. Women are the embodiment of different species, the embodiment of animals or plants in the traditional society, which is related to the concept of animism, nature worship and animal worship of the early ancestors. “The development of the higher attributes of man began at the lower stages of barbarism.” “Religious worship the forces of nature, about the personification of the gods, and about a dominated blur concept of god” [3], etc.. These statements show the contradiction between man and the nature, and human social development is not harmonious, which furthermore needs adjustment in a way of transforming insects, fish, birds and beasts into spirits to complement the collective understanding of the women in the folk culture. “Women in traditional societies are seen as irrational and morally weak who need to be regulated, and this irrationality and moral weakness is believed to come from the 'feminine' qualities of the female body.” Through the participation of women in social activities, from the perspective of individual and collective, pushing women to a moral high point, which signifies a feedback to the role of women in social life.

In the original thinking of Gepo people, women were the key to the birth of lives and the well-being of the family. On the one hand, the reverse thinking method is adopted in the story themed by the combination of a man and a fairy wife, and the combination of a woman transformed into an animal or a plant, which highlights the important role of women in social life. Besides, respects for women entrust good wishes, which are passed down from generation to generation in the form of stories, and internalized into a way of behavior. As Taylor said, “cultural relics”, is a cultural heritage some people still retain from ancient times, even with the development of society[5]. Great importance attached to women in the Gepo society reflects the social form dominated by women in ancient times. In daily life, Gepo women are industrious, kind-hearted, and thrifty, and function as the backbone of a harmonious family; In the ritual context, verbal story and behavioral story are interdependent, and women present the habits by combining the physical practice with verbal story and behavior, realizing the mutual construction of oral narrative and daily rituals.

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